

# Salem Witch Trials

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## Historical Context

In the year 1692, over 150 men and women were accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts. Twenty-four people were sentenced to death because of the accusations. Nineteen men and women were hanged, four others died in prison, and one man was pressed to death while refusing to plead. Many have wondered how the Salem witch trials could have occurred, as they evoke visions of superstition, persecution, discrimination, and biased individuals with ulterior motives. However, it is important to understand the numerous factors that may have contributed to what is now viewed as a mockery of justice. Additionally, just as many crimes have contributing factors, the Salem witch trials are an excellent example to better understand such a tragedy so that it may be avoided in the future.

From a historical context, during that time period, Salem was not alone in either the persecution or execution of the accused. During the Hartford witch hunts, from 1647 to 1663, 34 people were accused and approximately 17 were found guilty and subsequently hanged (Woodward 2003). The prosecution of witchcraft as a crime was a phenomenon that had been occurring in Europe long before the Puritans arrived in New England. During the time leading up to the Salem witch trials, there were three significant time periods of witch-hunting in Scotland: from 1590 to 1597, 1640 to 1644, and 1660 to 1663 (Duncan 1993). During the seventeenth century, in northern Norway, 137 were accused and sent to trial. Of those accused, 92 were burned, hung, tortured to death, or died in prison (Alm 2003). Europeans were not the only culture to believe in the existence of witches of any sort. We know that during this century Africans, as

well as Native Americans (from North and South America), also believed in witches and witchcraft, or at least a malevolent practice of magic. An exhaustive review of the historical literature and documents from New England, as well as the witch hunts occurring in England more than 50 years prior, reveals extremely varied explanations of what constituted the practice of witchcraft.

## Events Leading to the Trials

The events in Salem began in late January 1692 with two preadolescent girls, Elizabeth Parris and Abigail Williams, who at times, displayed convulsive seizures and screaming alternating with periods of unresponsiveness or what appeared to be a trance. Elizabeth's father and local minister, Reverend Samuel Parris, consulted the local physician who could find nothing medically wrong with Elizabeth or Abigail. Parris then began to fast and hold prayer vigils, and he consulted several other local clergy. Eventually, the children had to provide some explanation for their antics and they accused three women of "bewitching" them. The South American Indian/African slave serving in the Parris home, Tituba, and two social outcasts. Although original records from the time state that Tituba was an Indian, later literary works sparked arguments that she was at least part African. Most scholars acknowledge that Tituba was probably at least part South American Indian and had probably spent a portion of her life in Barbados.

Breslaw (1997) and Rosenthal (2003) posited that accusing Tituba of witchcraft was to blame someone originating from a different, misunderstood culture. Though we know today that she held no blame, Tituba's confession, subsequent accusations, and ability to convince others that there was danger in the form of a coven was an ingenious method of utilizing the community's fears as a diversion. Tituba was also able to take advantage of the merit and trust she had gained as a conforming member of their society serving in the household of a local minister. Had

Tituba confessed and not also accused others, the witch hunt might not have continued and escalated. Just as the young girls had deflected blame, Tituba also appeared to direct attention away from herself, although she did not incriminate specific persons. Tituba understood the Puritan concept of witchcraft, yet she was also familiar with the African and South American concepts. Intertwining parts of each (creating something both familiar enough to be accepted and unfamiliar enough to be good reason for fear), along with her own ethnicity, may have caused the community to perceive her as an authority on the possible presence of evil. Tituba's confession had confirmed that a coven was at work and some scholars believe that *scapegoating* was a common psychological method used by the Puritans to deal with the stress of daily hardships or misunderstandings. Ultimately, the communal rationalization would be as follows: If they had allowed the devil to thrive among them, then this was why God had allowed their plans for a Christian society to experience hardship. Surely, ridding themselves of the devil (by searching out the witches) would bring them back into God's good graces and their troubles would cease.

The events that began with two young girls, soon spread to a larger group. The affliction spread to other girls in the community – at first there were only two girls, but the group grew to seven or eight. Their life consisted of completing chores, reading their Bible, or attending church services. Aside from childrearing and household activities, females had little value. Throwing tantrums, acting as if ill, hallucinating, or claiming to be tormented by someone unseen, all could have been undertaken to make life more interesting, gain attention, or to feel more important. Kocić (2010) suggested that this was a gender crime. During the seventeenth century, in the New World, females and children were less important than men who could perform most of the hard labor required for survival, own property, or vote. To be a female child meant that one was least important of all. Additionally, because the Puritans believed that females possessed a soul more prone to sin due to weakness, certainly there were gender issues that influenced the culture and events. While the majority of those executed were female, all of the

accusers were female, and almost one quarter of the accused were male. King and Mixon (2010) point out that although the accusers were female, most of the witnesses at trial who provided the evidence required for a guilty judgment were male. However, researchers disagree on whether the first attempt to discover the witch controlling the girls was made by a male or a female. The act of producing a witch cake (made from rye and the girls' urine) and subsequently feeding it to the family dog, which would supposedly produce the witch immediately, was in itself an act of witchcraft. Some speculate that this was viewed as forgivable because it was committed in an effort to help the girls.

The events also raised the theological question among the local clergy and authorities of whether or not grace was also an influence on those who would be found guilty. If a person was not obliged to follow the moral laws because they were in a state of grace, then the actions of that person were not punishable. However, a person could not really prove a state of grace except by the support of others to confirm their piety. The local clergy were split as to whether being in a state of grace (saved) made a person free to ignore moral laws from the Bible. At that time the clergy and local magistrates were the highest authority, rather than those in government positions, such as the governor. This divide may reveal a struggle for power within the community structure.

Religious beliefs and sociopolitical stressors were a significant influence. New England had been experiencing political upheaval in the years leading up to the Salem witch trials. While New England was primarily under English rule, the Dutch had temporarily regained control of New York during 1673–1674. Additionally, King Philip's war (1673–1674) had laid waste to much of New England, resulting in significant loss of life and destruction of natural resources, which led to further hardship. Government positions of leadership changed, and with them Massachusetts's sense of legitimacy also came into question. In 1680, Massachusetts lost its role in governing New Hampshire, while enduring a greedy royal governor, Edward Cranfield. Stability and a sense of security were low. Cranfield was later replaced in 1685 by Edmund Andros, who proved to be more ethical, but forced the

Puritans to accept Anglican public worship in Boston. Clergy and magistrates began to panic about whether they could achieve the theocratic oligarchy they desired and felt was divinely ordained. These authority figures liked the idea of ousting Andros, but were more content when they saw that the newest Charter, delivered in January 1692, was more reasonable to them. This Charter included a Body of Liberties consisting of civil and criminal laws that were biblically based (Haefeli 2003). This also gave their biblical beliefs legal support.

Puritans were reformed Protestants and this historical event only serves to support the notion that they were a judgmental and strict community. Often, people become extreme in the rationalization that they are “right,” based on their personal or communal belief systems. This event is a good example of this rationalization.

Additionally, one of the early victims, Martha Corey, may have been targeted for being a Quaker (Purdy 2007), supporting the position that this was a religious persecution. Moreover, Winthrop, a local physician, dabbled with “magical” activities practicing alchemy and kabbalah (Murrin 2003), but he was not accused of witchcraft. He was consulted as a witch-finder of sorts and his opinion carried great weight in the community. This further suggests that these events were religious persecution.

### The Theory of Ergot Poisoning

Some scholars have proposed that in 1691, a chain of agricultural events and wet weather conditions resulted in a small rye harvest and the possible contamination by *Claviceps Purpurea* (commonly called ergot), a fungus that had not yet been identified. This, combined with a shortage of food, meant that the rye crop would not be stored and dried after its harvest. The grain would be needed to make bread. Ergot contains strong alkaloids that cause psychotropic reactions and it is not destroyed by the level of heat required for baking bread. The most rudimentary component of ergot (Lysergic acid, which includes D-lysergic acid diethylamide) often causes the consumer to experience hallucinations and delusions similar to those of LSD or magic mushrooms in today’s culture (Matossian 1982). Convulsive ergotism

is often suggested with regard to the behaviors of the accused. This malady frequently presents with additional symptoms of fatigue, headache, nausea, difficulty walking, and pain in the individual’s extremities and back. Severe poisoning or overdose causes the feeling of bugs crawling beneath the skin, muscle spasm, and seizures (Caporael 1976; Matossian 1982). This could explain the behavior of the young women who made the accusations that became a contributing factor to the events.

This theory is most likely only a part of the greater picture, as it does not explain the actions of others involved, such as judges, clergy, or witch-testers. Additionally, some scholars dispute the assertion that ergot could have infected the crops that year because of a lack of objective weather reports that would include rainfall and humidity measurements, as well as a lack of corresponding and consistent symptoms among the accusers (Spanos 1983; Woolf 2000). Spanos and Woolf were also astute in mentioning that there are two forms of ergotism: *convulsive* as Caporael (1976) suggested had occurred, and *gangrenous* affecting the limbs with gangrene, which no one contracted during this event. Spanos and Woolf maintain that if ergotism had been present, both types would most likely have manifested.

### Psychological Components

Psychological processes surely contributed, though most likely at a subconscious level. *Cognitive dissonance*, followed by *scapegoating* and *rationalization*, almost certainly contributed to the continuation and escalation of the events. The young girls may have felt that they had no choice other than to convince themselves that their behavior was good and proper in their efforts to protect their self-esteem or to avoid punishment themselves. When pressed as to what was truly wrong or causing their illness, pointing a finger at someone else (deflection) would have been a method of dissipating their discomfort and shifting the blame, especially if the person was accused of nonconformity (outgroup), hence the accusation of consorting with the devil in a highly religious society. They would have found it very difficult to admit to faking or malingering if that were the case. Punishment in colonial

America could be severe at that time, including days in the stocks, or public whipping. Moriarty (2001) reports that none of the adults categorically intervened to stop the injustice either, and that they may also have experienced cognitive dissonance after a while but could not damage their social standing, ejection from the social group, or personal safety by speaking against the actions of those in power. Perhaps the only personal reaction against the events was that of Judge Saltonstall, one of the three presiding judges, who resigned after a single hanging.

The behavior and participation of adults from the community might also be explained by *crowd behavior*. While individuals were part of a larger group, they may have been affected by deindividuation and felt less inhibited by social constraints, less personally responsible for accepting the accusations, or for allowing the resulting executions. Furthermore, deindividuation causes people to become more obedient to the group expectations or norms. After participating in this group thought, they may have felt it difficult to remove themselves from the more serious consequences. The isolationism, poor governmental system, lack of cohesiveness, and stress of the Puritan community may have caused them to deteriorate into negative groupthink.

Schoeneman (1975) proposed that witch hunts in general could have been a means of culture change where *scapegoating* was used during social turmoil or conflict. When a predominant social group begins to deteriorate, the use of reorientation brings about a focus on the differences of a subgroup, which then becomes demonized and its members become scapegoats. The dominant culture begins to perceive (real or imaginary) that it is being threatened, or that its primary goal(s) are threatened, and it reacts by creating more confusion through the coping mechanism of deflection, to regain control or power. As muddled as this process might seem, it is an attempt by the dominant culture to rid itself of a perceived threat. This initially causes more disorganization and deterioration in a manner that gets the members caught in self-preservation. It is inherently temporary, as accusers eventually run out of individuals who are socially acceptable to accuse. The witch hunt loses validity when those of greater social status are implicated. Thus, the pattern begins to expire while the dominant

culture preserves at least a small portion of its belief in the demonization of the subgroup.

### Religious Divisions within the Community

Layhew (2013) notes social and financial concerns within the community that could also have contributed to the tragedy, whether conscious or subconscious. Samuel Parris had been the minister since 1689, though his installment was not unanimously supported by the congregation. By 1691, he had been voted out and had lost a great deal of social power. This prompted his habit of lecturing the community that the congregation's divided status was proof that they had been contaminated with something evil or perhaps by the devil himself. By February 1692, the community had ceased to pay his salary. Some researchers have pointed to the faction supporting Parris as being behind the accusations. However, those against Parris made up no more than half of those accused, and two women from his own household were accused early in the debacle. Parris and the other clergy most likely benefited from increasing concern about witches and the devil because it caused people to seek pastoral care, influenced public dependence on the local ministers, as well as considerably increased attendance at Parris's church (King and Mixon 2010).

### Financial Impacts

Interestingly, there were a few wealthy widows in the area and several were among the accused. Fourteen of the accused (male and female) were considered quite wealthy prior to these events. If an alleged witch died without confessing, her property could be transferred to another family member rather than being confiscated by the government. Though little evidence supports this, it is possible that some adults not only allowed the persecution to continue, but participated in the process for some personal gain. Unfortunately, the records regarding the dispersal or confiscation of the victims' belongings are incomplete or missing (Friedman and Howie 2013).

### The Events Culmination and Repercussions

Many people gathered courage to speak out after a crucial turning point highlighting the miscarriage of justice. George Burroughs, the only minister accused of witchcraft as part of the Salem witch trials, was hung, despite passing the test of reciting the Lord's Prayer without flaw, in August of 1692. Many of the well educated in and around Boston began circulating letters expressing their displeasure, as those in the upper class began to be accused. The young female accusers were running out of social outcasts, or persons whom others did not mind relieving themselves of. Perhaps most telling is that the clergy were also beginning to voice disapproval. Reverend Thomas Brattle of Boston wrote to Governor Phips, and Reverend William Milborne pled with the legislature to put an end to the trials. Governor Phips ordered that spectral evidence was no longer permitted. He then stepped in and dissolved the court when his own wife was accused as a witch, after she had arranged for the release of a personal friend. Later, Governor Phips pardoned and released all those who were still imprisoned.

### Summary

Witchcraft, whatever form it took, was classified as a crime by the theocratic governing system. However, an informal practice of juries at the time was not to impose capital punishment on anyone unless the criminal act was considered to be a capital offense according to both the Bible and English common law, and if it was not capital in nature, then it was not deserving of capital punishment. Witchcraft, as well as murder, met this qualification at the time (Murrin 2003). Current logic seems to indicate that unless ergot poisoning was experienced, the actions committed by the accusers, witch-testers, judges, and executioners could fall under the categories of religious persecution, political manipulation, fraud, conspiracy to commit theft by fraud, and superstition supported by psychological coping mechanisms. Furthermore, the magistrates were not acting with legal precepts by allowing spectral evidence – the accusers reporting that they had seen visions or specters of the person harming them. Even local ministers, including Cotton

Mather, cautioned against the use of spectral evidence. Additionally, there was no method to defend, or refute by alibi, when spectral sightings were allowed as evidence. Thankfully, no one accused based solely on spectral evidence was tried or executed (Craker 1997).

Though we may never know the exact details of this event, the Salem witch trials continue to act as a reminder for us today. We must remain vigilant in the pursuit of true justice, while being aware of all that might lead to injustice. We must continue to be aware of inequalities between social structures, political unrest or manipulation, fraud for personal gain, or psychological coping mechanisms. Almost certainly, the cause was a combination of many factors, including the possibility of ergot poisoning. In addition, unfortunately their status in that society and time period left females particularly vulnerable.

**SEE ALSO:** Age and Female Victimization; Evil Women Hypothesis

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